

12. THE SUSPECT

The most bizarre thing happens. Only a couple of weeks after Trish's wedding, Cheryl starts to receive flowers at work from a secret admirer. Robert has been pestering her for a while. He talks about getting back together. She decides to call him.

She is sitting at her desk and playing with a pencil. He answers the phone and seems busy. She asks, "You're not sending me flowers, are you?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Some secret love has been sending me flowers. I thought that it might be you."

He is still pretty curt. She feels a little perturbed by his lack of concern.

She taunts him, "By the way, Robert, I saw you at Anchor. I didn't know that baby sitters were allowed to take kids to bars."

He acts a little irate, "What do you mean?"

"The girl that you were with didn't even look as if she graduated high school. You always told me that you hated to come to the Anchor."

Robert makes an excuse, "She wanted to go."

Cheryl acts surprised, "And you didn't tell her that you're ex hangs out there all the time?"

"I guess that it slipped my mind."

"Slipped is the right word."

She wishes that she hadn't have called him.

Then she calls up Brian. He acts equally put out.

"You haven't been sending me flowers, have you?"

"Were you expecting me to?"

She taunts him, "I don't know. Would you like to send me flowers?"

He doesn't take a joke well. "Why did you call? I'm a little busy."

"I've been getting flowers at work anonymously. I thought that it might be you."

He inquires, "Were you wishing that it might be me?"

He is still so full of himself. If only he wasn't so boring.

She still can't figure out who could be sending the flowers. As she is leaving for lunch, she sees Darren coming in the door of the building.

She puts her hands up as if in self-defense. "I really don't want to see you again. You called me all these times like some kind of weirdo."

"I'm not here about that."

"Darren, you're not sending me flowers, are you?" she is interrogating him.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She breathes easier. The flowers aren't from him.

"Why are you here, Darren?"

He seems very tongue-tied. He reluctantly asks, "That time that we went out, I dropped my pen in your car. Did you see it?"

"No I didn't."

Now she's really at a loss to explain what is going on. Darren has added another element to the puzzle. It might not be something romantic at all. Her admirer could be someone who is a

pest. She realizes that there is little time for romance in her life. She is too suspicious of men.

It is the third day that Cheryl has received flowers from her admirer. Both Robert and Brian have denied sending them is surprised how put upon both seemed when she called them. She has to come up with alternative. Again she is playing detective.

She sits at her desks and runs her finger along the stem of the rose. She is trying to conjure up an image of her secret love. Is he the perfect answer to all her questions about love. Even if she finds the wonder who is trying to woo her at this early stage, will he become like Robert and Brian once she gets to know him? She feels like perfection is the least that she will accept. She will never accommodate herself just to be with a man.

That night she talks about it with Amy at the Anchor.

“Men might perceive you as too stable.”

Cheryl tries to make sense of it, “I don’t get it. How can I be too stable?”

“Then a man might think that you don’t need someone to prop them up. You’ll scare them away when they can’t measure up to your ideal.”

“It’s not an ideal. It’s just what I do every day.”

Amy is more descriptive about the problem, “That’s just it. You seem too perfect. There’s no space for someone else.”

Cheryl thinks about what she has to do to make herself more approachable. She can’t change that much. She can let her life fall apart just so Superman can come to the rescue. She is not in distress. Sure she’s had some bad nights. But she’s not going to destroy herself.

“Amy, what can I do about it?”

Amy advises her, “Live a little. Throw caution to the wind.”

“It’s not as if we haven’t got a little crazy here. Some nights I’ve been out of my head.”

She wonders if Amy’s inexperience means that her advice is only of limited benefit.

Perhaps, this is what happens when you’re older. You settle into you ways.

Amy adds, “You don’t want to get too settled in your ways. Then you can’t react when the right man comes along. You just can’t make time for him.”

Cheryl feels as if Amy is reading her mind. If it’s that easy, maybe Amy could point her in the right direction.

Cheryl asks, “Amy, what’s your advice.”

“You could go out with Burt.”

“No way! No, no, no!”

Amy informs her, “I told you that he asked about you.”

“And he also embarrassed me. He has a lot of growing up to do. I’m not his baby sitter.”

“He’s a really fun guy,” Amy defends him some more.

“If that’s what I have to do, count me out. There’s only so much of myself that I have to give.”

Amy is still very naive. She’s trying to cast Cheryl as an old maid. There’s only about five years difference in their ages. But in that time Cheryl has matured. She has come to know who she really is. Even though she sees her friends getting married, that’s their lives. She is committed to living for herself.

Amy can’t understand. She still hasn’t resolved her career. Cheryl has too much to lose to waste it on the wrong guy. As they talk into the night, it becomes clear that nothing is going to

happen. She feels great that she has a new friend. But she doesn't want to feel as if she is just starting over. She can hang out with Amy as long as she doesn't pretend that she can live the same lifestyle.

The next morning the flowers are waiting for Cheryl again. As she is going down in the elevator, she sees Will. When she started at the company, he would ask her out. He kept trying.

She gets a sinking feeling in her stomach, "You're not my secret admirer."

"No, not at all. I don't know what you're talking about."

Cheryl asks, "Why are you here? I thought that you changed companies."

He seems all flustered, "I'm sorry about running into you like this. I just had some papers to sign."

She had forgotten about Will. Now she runs down the other people in the office. She can't imagine who is sending her the flowers.

She crosses all the other suspects off the list. She's still wondering who could it be. There are no clues. Nothing from the florist shop. She just hopes it isn't some weirdo. She had enough shit from Darren.

It's a long Wednesday of work. She has to stay on her toes. Her clients ask all kinds of questions. She also goes to a meeting in the firm about investment strategies. By the time she finishes work, she is exhausted. She leaves at 6:30. Much later than usual.

With all her fatigue, she is committed to getting a work out. She stretches out in the pool afterwards. She is starting to recover from work. She needs some food and then sleep.

As she is getting ready for bed, Trish calls her.

"Cheryl, come pick me up. I need to talk to you."

"I was just getting into bed. It's been a long day."

Trish pleads with her, "Please, please, please."

She hates it when Trish begs. She heads over to new house. Trish gets in her car. They head over to the Anchor. After they get their drinks, Trish starts to tell her story.

"I've been a good girl. I've been faithful to Greg since we got married. Well, I was showing a house today. And this cute single guy was giving me this look. We were in the bedroom. It was all a little suggestive. He held my hand. I felt so turned on. I started making out with him."

Cheryl advises her, "Take it for what it is. It was fun. It got you excited. You're with Greg now. Act it out with him"

"This guy is so cool."

Cheryl admonishes her, "He's one of your customers."

"I've never been touched like that before."

Cheryl is forceful, "That's bull shit!"

I've had loads of experience. Things I'm ashamed of. But never never like this."

"What's his name?" Cheryl is playing along.

"Eddie."

Now she makes her point to Trish, "Well, tell yourself that Eddie was fun. But you need to grow up."

"I've made a date with him."

Cheryl is frustrated. "Why aren't you with him instead of talking to me?"

Trish makes excuses, "It's not safe. It's OK if Greg thinks that I'm with you."

"You're not going to use me as an alibi?" Cheryl is cautious. She feels used.

"No. Not at all!"

Cheryl stares at Trish intently, "Why are you doing this? I remember when you went out with that married man. That was almost the limit. But now, this is about your marriage. You have to have more respect for yourself."

"I do. I do." She defends her actions.

Cheryl is almost angry. She doesn't want to be used, "End this immediately."

"I'm trying to."

"You're going to meet him. You're using me as cover. You're arguing with yourself. And now you can blame me."

Trish disagrees, "That's not what's happening."

She wants to pin Trish down. "Don't lie to me. I know you better than you know yourself. You've got away with it before you were married. And marriage isn't the solution. It's not going to stop."

More than ever Cheryl is resentful. She feels that Trish is doing this to all of them.. She wants to do something about it.

The conversation only seems to inspire Trish more. Is there nothing that she can do to stop her? Nothing at all. Of course not. The Anchor Girls have only encouraged this sort of adventure. Now is no different. None at all.

"If you ever want to win the contest, this is going to turn out all bad."

Trish hardly cares about Sara's contest. She has her own game to win."

"What contest?"

"To win the Anchor."

"I've forgotten about that. I have other prizes. Besides, I could get a hefty settlement in a divorce. I just have to wait for the right moment."

"Trish, you're crazy."

"Let's do shots."

"You do that. I'm driving."

The more that Trish drinks, the more that she is reminded about how much she wants to be with Eddie, her new boy. She works herself into enough of a frenzy that sleep will be the final reply. She will wake up in the morning with a sense of well being.

On the other hand, Cheryl is living Trish's guilt. She knows that it will catch up with her at some point. Cheryl wants to accelerate the process.

On the way home Trish comments, "These seats seem really low. I feel as if my legs are up in the air."

"You're not the first to say something."

Cheryl is glad to close the door on the world. She takes a quick shower and settles into bed. She hope to catch just enough sleep to deal with the morning.

Cheryl doesn't want to believe it. She wants to ignore the evidence of infidelity. But then Trish's vice gives her one leg up on her friend. She is totally embroiled in that kind of competitive spirit. If Greg doesn't suspect something, so be it. It's not Cheryl's place to reveal the dastardly deed. She herself has already been in the middle of that sort of controversy before.

After all, all's fair in love and war although she isn't sure exactly where all this fits. For Cheryl's part, she is certain and must live with that knowledge. Now that she's convinced herself that Trish is indeed engaged in extracurricular activities, she wants to see it for her own eyes. Who is this guy that she's making all the fuss over?

Cheryl feels that she has encouraged Trish with all her complaints about her husband.

"If Greg treats you badly, don't take his shit. There are loads of other guys."

But she said all that in passing. She never expected Trish to really follow through.

"Your face is like an open book. You can't hide a thing from any of us" Cheryl tells her one night."

"That's not true!" maintains Trish.

Now Cheryl is facing the results of that challenge. Trish has tried to pretend that nothing is going on. And her game worked only for so long. Since she is used to spending so much time with her friends, it is difficult to explain her extended absences. Diane and Stevie lead busy enough lives that they are willing to believe Trish's excuses. Cheryl is her usual cynical self.

Cheryl can still hear the words echo from their conversation over a year ago, "Marriage is no sign of sure happiness."

She gives Trish a ride from work.

"I need to pick up my car from the shop. Can you do me a favor Cheryl?"

"Of course."

Trish starts meeting Fast Eddie at the empty houses that she is selling. In the evening, she goes back to Greg as if nothing has happened. He is enamored with the perks of marital bliss. Cheryl finds little humor in the clandestine rendezvous. She swears that she will do her utmost to put the mischief to a precipitous end.

She has already followed Trish in the past. She imagines engaging in the same kind of behavior again. But she feels that she has to say something to her friend in the hope of dissuading. Cheryl actually confronts her in front of Trish's place.

"Cheryl, what is your problem? Greg is going to be home any second."

"I thought that this was going to stop when you married Greg. But you're still carrying on."

Trish is justifiably defensive, "This is hardly your business. I don't care if you're my friend. You have to let it be."

Cheryl is out of her car and walking up and down the driveway, "But this isn't fair."

"What are you worried about? The damn contest. Are you going to ruin a friendship over that?"

Cheryl has her own solution, "Maybe, we just need different friends."

"What about the contest?" Trish is pressing Cheryl to find out her reason.

Cheryl is mad, "Fuck the contest! I never really cared about it."

"Neither do I," screams Trish. "Then what is this about?"

"You can't get away with this!"

"This is something that I need to figure out on my own."

"The only thing that you're figuring out, Trish, is how to sneak around. This isn't going to change."

"Cheryl, you just have to get in your car and go. We can deal with this another time."

Trish hopes that she can have some kind of peace of mind. She feels torn apart by her friend's interference.

"Trish, what are you going to do about it?"

"It's still none of your business. You can't continue to mess with my life. I think that is the worst part of the Anchor girls. We've all become part of each other's business. The contest has only made it worse."

Cheryl doesn't want to leave. She feels helpless. She wants some resolution to the crisis. But she can't make any sense why she is really here. Trish stands in the doorway of her house. She is ready to go in. She expects Cheryl to go. For a long moment, they both stare at each other.

"I'm going in," says Trish. She is trying to use the door as a signal for her friend to get back in her car.

Cheryl hardly moves. "This isn't finished."

"Cheryl, what are you doing? This really has nothing to do with your life. Just go!"

Cheryl still doesn't budge. She doesn't want to give up without something to show for her troubles. Trish can't give in. She just leaves Cheryl standing in the driveway and closes the door.

Cheryl doesn't know what to do. Nothing has really changed. Cheryl still can't figure out why she cares so much. She barely knows Greg. And she's never met Eddie. This seems like a weird way to end it.

She gets back in her car and sits there for a good fifteen minutes. Then she drives back to her place. She wonders what Trish is thinking.

Even when she gets home, Cheryl doesn't get out of her car. She is wondering why Trish's behavior is even bothering her. She knows that she is still feeling the pain over her breakups with Robert and Brian. And she still hasn't met someone new to replace them. It's a lot easier pretending that she can somehow influence her friend's life. Trish is in a downward spiral. There is simply nothing that Cheryl can do.

Before she has a chance to get out, Trish calls her on her cell.

"Cheryl, I'm sorry that I got so pissed at you before. But you just showed up out of the blue."

"I just had to say something."

Trish says, "I just wish that you had called. It would have made it all so much easier."

"I just felt like I had to go over there."

"You have to understand. I love Greg. But Eddie knows how to touch a woman."

Something seems preposterous about the argument. But Trish is obviously convinced, and nothing will influence her to change. As Trish continues to talk on, Cheryl rests her hand in between the two seats. Her fingers come to rest on something solid. She can feel it move. She assumes that it is a hinge for the seat belt or some other such thing.

When she finishes her conversation with Trish, she starts to fiddle with the hinge. She realizes that it isn't the seat belt. Something is down there. She works to dislodge it. It's Darren's pen—Wow!

She is looking under the seat when she sees Trish's signature pearl necklace in the car. Trish hasn't noticed that it's missing.

This is Cheryl's cue. Her mind starts to work over time. It's obvious that Trish doesn't know anything about the necklace. She might assume that she misplaced it in one of the empty houses where she is conducting her affair with Eddie. Cheryl is scheming. If she just dropped the necklace in Josh's car, she could kill two birds with one stone. Stevie would figure that Josh was two timing her with Trish. And Stevie would not hesitate to tell Greg as well. That would bring down the whole deck of cards. It would be better than telling Greg herself.

The contest has made her more than desperate. She is the puppet master pulling the strings of the marionettes. What has happened to their friendship? She dangles the necklace before her at this moment. What is Trish thinking at this moment? Does she have any idea where it is?

Cheryl feels that she can't go through with it. It's not just about the contest. It's about honor among friends. That's all the more reason that Trish has to work things out on her own. But Cheryl can't remain silent. What does she have to do to set Trish straight?"

At the same time, she thinks about Stevie and Josh. She can't let Josh off the hook. What can she do to get even with him?

Cheryl feels pathetic. She's not acting much different than Darren. She needs something to take her mind of this silliness. Worse than even she needs a drink. She has Amy meet her in Virginia Highlands. She can hardly stay home.

"You found her necklace. You haven't called her yet."

Cheryl pauses as she hears Amy repeat her predicament. Amy continues, "Trish is out of control. You don't want to act just the same."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"The only thing that you can do, Cheryl. Forget about it and worry about your own life."

Cheryl asks, "How do I do that?"

Some college kid is mooning over Cheryl.

"Little boy," says Cheryl, "I'm not a chaperone."

"You're kind of cute."

"You're really drunk."

"Let me buy you a drink," he asks.

Cheryl turns to Amy, "I thought that you said the guys were more mature here."

"I've never had problems."

"Amy, I guess this is my luck."

The drunken college student eases his way to the bar.

"Amy, let's go somewhere a little more mature than this."

Amy takes them to somewhere a little darker and more secluded.

"No one will bother you here," she says.

"I hope not."

After Amy gets the drinks, they continue to talk about Trish.

"Trish hasn't always been like this."

"Some guy really played a fast one on her. Now she's on the war path. I really feel bad for Greg."

"We both do. But he'll just have to figure out things in good time."

Cheryl is confused. She sips from her drink. "This is a good drink."

“Yeah, these are adult drinks.”

“Back to Trish. None of this is good for her,” claims Cheryl.

“I just want to know what is good for Cheryl. Sitting around and worrying about Trish.”

“It’s not just Trish. I just don’t know if any of us are going anywhere. We’re all just waiting for the big catastrophe.”

Amy doesn’t want to give in to Cheryl’s tales of woe.

“Stevie has the store. That’s a good start.”

“She depends on Josh to keep it afloat.”

“I thought that it’s doing well,” maintains Amy.

“It is. But he gave her the money in the first place.”

“Is that all that it takes to make everything turn out OK?”

“Stevie is so preoccupied with the store, I don’t think that she’s keeping close enough tabs on Josh.”

“Cheryl, could you use another drink?”

“We still have to make it back home. I just want something soft. Just a water.”

Amy wants to let loose. She is full of her exuberance.

“Amy, you have to live now. Make the best of it. Otherwise, you’ll become a bitter old woman like me. Or be in a loveless marriage like my friends.”

“Heavens, Cheryl. You’re almost the same age as I am.”

Cheryl looks at herself in the mirror. She’s hardly decrepit. She just feels like she’s a hundred years old. She really wishes that the trip to Virginia Highlands might be a welcome change from the Anchor. She’s been expecting miracles and none are forthcoming.

If only she was closer to home, she’d be tasting that next drink. She consoles herself with her water and pretends that it is the hardest stuff in the world.

“Sometimes at moments like this, I’m afraid that I’m going to become a lush. You know what they say about binge drinking.” Cheryl has a guilty look on her face.

“You’re not even drinking right now. What do you have to worry about. I’m the one who likes to party too much.” Amy spins around the table. The rest of the bar is so calm that they hardly notice anything else.

The next night Trish and Cheryl have their dreaded showdown at the Anchor. First thing, Cheryl produces the missing necklace.

“Didn’t you notice that this was gone?”

“I thought that I might have left this at Eddie’s.”

“You haven’t gone to his house?”

“Only once, Cheryl. Greg went out of town.”

Trish is feeling guilty. She takes her necklace back. She thinks that it might be a sign. She is relieved to get it back.

When she tries it on at home, it makes her feel sexy. Greg is acting rather smug. She calls up Eddie. She decides to sneak out in the middle of the night.

The next day Trish meets Cheryl for lunch, “Cheryl, I’m getting reckless.”

“I’ve said that from the beginning.”

“Greg was bugging really me last night. I put on my necklace. And he just ignored me. I thought that he might say something. It’s always had such memories for us. He just sat there.

So I decided to go out and find Eddie.”

“You’re blaming Greg. Did you even give him a chance to notice?” Cheryl wonders.

“What am I supposed to do?” asks Trish.

“This is getting more than crazy.”

“You’re right. I’m going to stop it. I just like it too much. You don’t know what it’s like until you try it. I should set up Eddie with you.”

Cheryl abhors that suggestion. The more that Trish gets away with things, the more that she is incorrigible. Now Cheryl has messed things up for her master plan. She has given the necklace back. There’s been no lesson for Trish. It’s encouraged her.

She thinks about Trish’s suggestion. Could she ever tolerate Eddie? Eddie is the kind of guy whose touch brings no obligations for him. Once she felt attached to him, he’d find another girl. That would be tragic.

Amy is working tonight. She sees Trish go to the bathroom.

“So you’re going one on one with her. How is it going?”

“Amy, I feel like I’m out of answers. She even dared to suggest that I date Eddie.”

“She has her reasons.”

Cheryl can’t take it, “They’re silly reasons as far as I’m concerned.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

Trish comes back to the table.

Cheryl attempts an introduction, “Trish, do you know Amy?”

“We’ve met. Sara introduced us.” Trish gives her a weird look. She senses that they have been talking about her.

Trish continues, “I got a call from Greg. He’s coming home soon.”

“Time to face the music.”

Trish resents being embarrassed in front of Amy. She gathers up her stuff and leaves.

“Amy, this is not going to last like this. Trish has to do something.”

“I just hope that it doesn’t all end in tears.”

Cheryl has almost forgotten about her admirer. She receives flowers the next day. She feels that she is watching the flowers wilt on her desk. This is the spill over of her tiff with Trish. Things aren’t getting any better.

After work, Cheryl decides to visit Stevie. There’s no one in the shop.

Stevie relates, “I actually had a great afternoon. I think that they all left to leave us a chance to catch up.”

“You seem excited.”

“I think that Josh and I are going to have a baby. He’s really excited about it.”

Cheryl hides her true feelings, “That’s great.”

She wonders about the contest. This is all that Stevie needs to commit completely to her marriage. Especially with the Trish’s travails, there seems little likelihood that anyone else can win. She doesn’t even count Diane in the running.

“How has your personal life been going, Cheryl?”

“I’ve been receiving flowers from a secret admirer, but everyone seems to deny it.” Her suspicions are again getting her worked up. What if it was Josh who was sending the flowers? She can’t believe it. But just the idea of it all makes her sick.

“Josh sometimes brings flowers to the shop. It really makes my day.”

Cheryl is pretending that marriage is finally taming him. But deep down she knows better. Trish has clued her in to more shenanigans on his part.

“Cheryl, I got this dress in that you might like.”

It is a simple black dress. A little short. It looks extremely flattering on Cheryl.

“How much?”

“Cost!”

“Done. I need a treat.”

She can't wait to wear it out. For the moment it takes her mind off all the silliness around her.

When she gets home, she puts the dress on again. Maybe this is all that she needs. A little energy in her life. Leave it to Stevie to provide the prescription for low times. Once she's sprayed her perfume on and arranged her hair for the last time, she feels that it's all perfect again. If her secret admirer would just come out of the shadows.

She feels that she needs a special event to complement the great dress.

She has a friend who is doing gallery show. From the moment that she walks in, all the heads turn. He's a photographer who has done some business work for her. But the gallery is full of portraits. Stunning women. But none compete with Cheryl. Cheryl holds her head up. He gives her a kiss.

“You like the flowers that I've sent you.”

“You're not my secret admirer,” she asks John.

“What?”

“Have you been sending me flowers for the past two weeks to remind me of the opening?”

“No, I sent them to your house today.”

“I've been getting them at work. I didn't notice any at home.”

She wonders what happened. Perhaps they couldn't get in the gate and they left them in the front. Now she is really blessed. She has two admirers.

Tonight, John is surrounded by his fans. Cheryl can hardly take up any more of his time. After spending a while admiring his work, she tells him that she has to go.

“You didn't even come here with anyone. I wish that I could have spent more time with you.” He gives her a big hug. “I'll meet you for lunch, and we'll catch up.”

“Yes, we will.”

Cheryl is hardly thinking about Trish. She decides to head home early. Tomorrow is Saturday, and she is going to get up to play some tennis.

When she gets home she discovers the mix up with the flowers. She takes them and cuts the stems and puts them in a vase on her dining room table. It's been a long week. She just wants to rest. To sleep all her troubles away.

That morning she wakes up with the sun. She dresses for tennis. She is meeting Amy. Amy played in high school and is a very good player. She makes Cheryl run the courts. By late morning, it is very warm. They pause for ice sweet tea. Then Cheryl heads home to shower and rest for the evening.

In her apartment, she wonders who is the secret admirer. For a while last night, John had

her going. But they are only friends. She just hopes that the flowers are coming from someone cool.

None of the girls have heard from Diane. They can only assume that her marriage has been the expected blessing. But the whirlwind quality makes them all doubt. At this point, Cheryl could use the same kind of magic. Just flowers and a quick marriage.

She takes her nap and just gives in to her fatigue. By the time that she wakes up, it is too late to go out. There is no one to wake Sleeping Beauty at this late stage. All for the best. It hasn't been a lost weekend. She feels that she is reestablishing her priorities. She actually reads a good book Sunday and watches a couple of DVD's. There are no temptations to head off to the Anchor. Instead, this Sunday is a focal point for Amy and a few of her friends. It is the changing of the guard.

Next weekend is going to be the one where Cheryl really lets go. She is taking her life back for herself. As she snacks on popcorn, she realizes that she has no worries. She isn't waiting for some guy to call. Really nothing at all. Just some more flowers.

More flowers arrive on Monday. It's going to be a crazy week!